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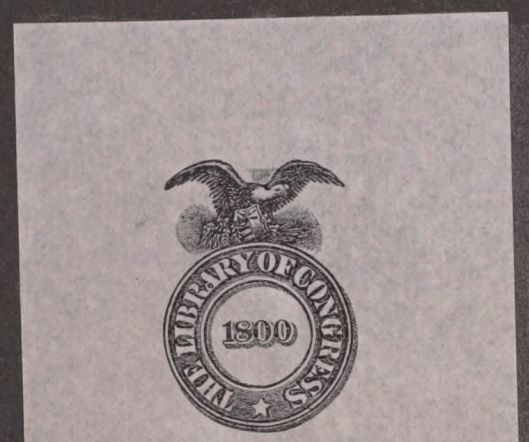

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MEDICAL MEN AND THE MUSES

By C. W. G. ROHRER, Ph. D., M. D.

BALTIMORE, MD.

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JOSEPH RODMAN DRAKE, M. D.
(1795-1820)
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MEDICAL MEN AND THE MUSES

I. *Joseph Rodman Drake, M. D.*

MOTIVES of affectionate memory, of professional pride, duty and veneration have prompted me to inaugurate this series of articles entitled, "Medical men and the Muses." Hitherto but scant attention has been paid to physicians in their relation to authorship. Painfully conscious of this fact, it is my purpose to make a careful survey of the entire field of literature; even antedating quaint old Chaucer, the "Father of Poetry," and continuing down to, and including, the very latest accessions to the ranks of our physician-poets.

Speaking generally, medical men are not much given to a serious cultivation of the Muses. I say this with due deference to the varied literary attainments of a favored few. The reason is not far to seek. In the case of the average practitioner of our noble art——

"Life's endless toil and endeavor"

with its concomitant hardships and privations, consume the major part of his sleeping and his waking hours.

But thrice happy, indeed, am I to add that there are a number of notable exceptions to the above rather sweeping statement and broad generalization. These include such familiar names as Oliver Goldsmith, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Weir Mitchell and Joseph Rodman Drake. Special mention should probably be made of Dr. Thomas Dunn English, the lovable author of "Ben Bolt;" and of Dr. S. Fillmore Bennett, to whose genius and talent we are indebted for the beautiful hymn, "The Sweet Bye and Bye."

Joseph Rodman Drake, M. D.

Joseph Rodman Drake, physician and poet, was born in the city of New York, August 7, 1795, the year that also gave birth to the eccentric physician, poet, and scientist, James Gates Percival. Drake's ancestors were among the earliest of the Pilgrim Fathers. He was descended from the same family as the great admiral of Elizabethan days, the American branch of which had served their country honorably, both in Colonial and Revolutionary times.

John Drake of Devonshire, a kinsman of the redoubtable Sir Francis and a member of the Council of Plymouth, came to Boston in the summer of 1630, accompanied by several sons, and soon after settled at East Chester, in the State of New York, where the family acquired a large estate. Jonathan Drake, the poet's father, a lineal descendant of the member of the Plymouth company, was a Colonel in the Revolutionary army. After the war he married Miss Hannah Lawrence, the daughter of Effingham Lawrence, of Flushing, a highly respected Long Island family, with as ancient an American ancestry as the Drakes.

Drake's father died while he was quite young, and the family had to contend with adverse circumstances. There were four children, Joseph and three sisters—Louisa, Millicent and Caroline. His sisters Caroline and Louisa shared his poetic instinct.

Boyhood and Youth.

The scenes of Drake's boyhood were the same as those that formed the environment of Irving,* memories of which are scattered thick through the literature of the day. Like Burns, Scott, Pringle, Armstrong, Wordsworth and others of his illustrious compeers, Drake never forgot his early surroundings, frequently reverting to them in his poetical productions, in terms of endearment. He was a precocious boy, for whom a career was anticipated by his friends while he was yet a mere child; and when he met Halleck, in his eighteenth year, he had already won some reputation.

During Drake's boyhood New York was still a picturesque, hospitable, rural capital, the center of the present city being miles distant in the country. The best families were all intimately associated in a social life that was cultivated and refined, still gay and unconventional. In this society Drake occupied a place which his loving qualities and fine talents must have won, even had it been denied him by birth.

Notwithstanding his straitened circumstances, Drake obtained a good education. He acquired a fair knowledge of English, some little Latin and French, and a vast amount of general information. His perception was rapid, and his memory tenacious. He was then, and always, a great reader. His reading included a wide range of books, especially works of imagination. His favorite poets were Shakespeare, Burns and Campbell.

*Washington Irving, American historian and novelist: born at New York, April 3, 1783; died at Irvington-on-Hudson, N. Y., November 28, 1859.

He was fond of discussion with his friends, and would talk by the hour, either side of an argument affording him equal opportunity.

Medical Training.

Drake began the study of medicine in 1813, with Drs. Archibald Bruce and Nicholas Romayne, the latter becoming strongly attached to his young pupil. William Langstaff and James E. De Kay were fellow students. He subsequently entered Columbia College, receiving the M. D. degree from that institution in 1816.

Drake immediately engaged in the practice of his chosen profession in New York City. In this capacity, however, he left but a fragmentary record of his activities. Practically no data are available appertaining to his career as a practitioner of medicine and surgery. But the mere fact that he obtained his degree from so celebrated a school as Columbia College, is proof positive that his medical attainments were of the highest order. Nevertheless, he was far more widely known as a poet and man of letters, young though he was, than as a physician.

Contributions to Literature.

"Drake is, on the whole, less remembered by his own poems than by the beautiful tribute which Halleck made to his memory."—*Edwin Percy Whipple.*

Drake was a poet in boyhood. The anecdotes preserved of his early youth show the prompt kindling of the imagination. At the age of five he composed highly admired conundrums in verse, and at ten wrote some promising juvenile poems. At fourteen, he wrote "The Mocking-Bird," the earliest of his poems which has been preserved. About the same time a portion of a poem, "The Past and the Present," which furnished the concluding passage of "Leon" in the published volume of his poems, was communicated to a friend in manuscript. Four years later he abandoned merchandise, a fellow clerk states, "from a distaste for business," and began the study of medicine with Drs. Bruce and Romayne. It was at this time, at the age of eighteen, that Drake first met Halleck,* through James E. DeKay,** then a medical student pursuing his studies at Guilford.

"The Culprit Fay," composed hastily among the Highlands of the Hudson, is Drake's longest poem. It consists of 639 lines, subdivided into 36 stanzas. It was written on a wager, in three days, before the author had reached the age of twenty-one years. The following extracts will convey to the mind of the reader a pretty clear idea of the surpassing beauty, the inimitable rhythm, and the remarkable poetic imagery displayed in this, the lengthiest production of Drake's brain and pen.

The Culprit Fay.

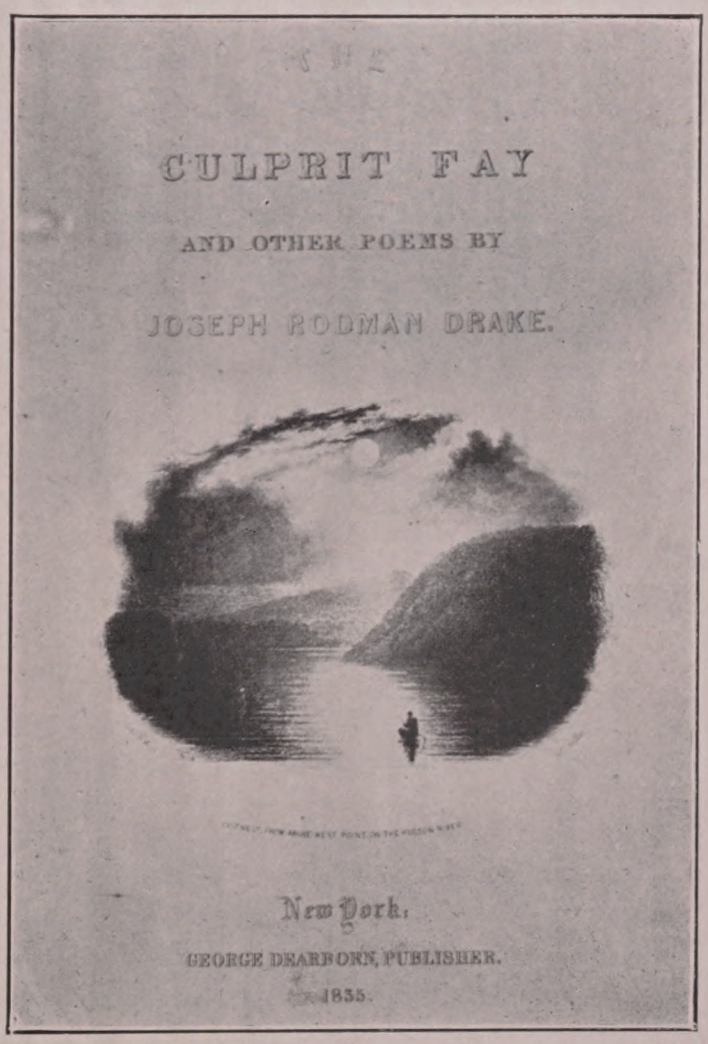
'Tis the middle watch of a summer's night;
The earth is dark, but the heavens are bright;
Naught is seen in the vault on high
But the moon, and the stars, and the cloudless sky,
And the flood which rolls its milky hue—
A river of light on the welkin blue.
The moon looks down on old Cro'nest;
She mellows the shades on his craggy breast;
And seems his huge gray form to throw,
In a silver cone on the waves below.

* * * * * *

*Fitz-Greene Halleck, American poet: born at Guilford, Conn., July 8, 1790; died there November 19, 1867. He holds an honored place in American literature by his few but excellent writings. His "Marco Bozarris" is pronounced the best war lyric in the English language.

**DeKay was educated as a physician, but devoted himself from his early years to natural history. He died August 8, 1851, at his residence, Oyster Bay, Long Island.

'Tis the hour of fairy ban and spell:—
The wood-tick has kept the minutes well;
He has counted them all with click and stroke,
Deep in the heart of the mountain oak;
And he has awakened the sentry elve
Who sleeps with him in the haunted tree,
To bid him ring the hour of twelve,
And call the fays to their revelry.
* * * * * *
They come from beds of lichen green,
They creep from the mullein's velvet screen;
Some on the backs of beetles fly
From the silver tops of moon-touched trees.
Where they swung in their cobweb hammocks high
And rocked about in the evening breeze.
* * * * * *
But, hark! from tower on tree-top high,
The sentry-elf his call has made;
A streak is in the eastern sky,
Shapes of moonlight! flit and fade!
The hill-tops gleam in morning's spring,
The sky-lark shakes his dappled wing,
The day-glimpse glimmers on the lawn,
The cock has crowed, and the fays are gone.



Engraved Title-Page of "The Culprit Fay and Other Poems," Published in 1836.

THE AMERICAN FLAG.

When Freedom from her mountain height
Unfurled her standard to the air,
She tore the azure robe of night,
And set the stars of glory there;
She mingled with its gorgeous dyes
The milky baldric of the skies,
And striped its pure celestial white
With streakings of the morning light;
Then from his mansion in the sun
She called her eagle-bearer down,
And gave unto his mighty hand
The symbol of her chosen land.
— Joseph Rodman Drake.

The American Flag.

Drake's few shorter lyrics throb with genuine poetic feeling, and show the loss sustained by literature in the author's early death. Best known of these is "The American Flag," written at his residence next to the corner of Park Row and Beekman Street, New York, between the 20th and 25th of May, 1819. The last four lines of this poem, as written by Drake, were as follows:

"And fixed as yonder orb divine
That saw thy bannered blaze unfurled,
Shall thy proud stars resplendent shine,
The guard and glory of the world."

These not satisfying their author, he said: "Fitz, can't you suggest a better stanza?" Whereupon Halleck sat down and wrote on the spur of the moment the lines that now conclude the poem, which Drake immediately accepted, and incorporated. The complete poem comprises five stanzas, making the grand total of 61 lines. Appended is a portion of the third stanza, and the fifth one entire, which is the last:

Flag of the free! thy folds shall fly,
The sign of hope and triumph high,
When speaks the signal-trumpet tone,
And the long line comes gleaming on:
Ere yet the life-blood, warm and wet,
Has dimmed the glistening bayonet,
Each soldier eye shall brightly turn
To where thy sky-born glories burn,
And as his springing steps advance,
Catch war and vengeance from the glance.
* * * * * *

Flag of the free heart's hope and home!
By angel hands to valor given;
Thy stars have lit the welkin dome,
And all thy hues were born in heaven.
Forever float that standard sheet!
Where breathes the foe but falls before us,
With Freedom's soil beneath our feet,
And Freedom's banner streaming o'er us!

The "Croaker" Papers.

The "Croaker" was a signature adopted by Halleck and Drake, from an amusing character in Goldsmith's comedy of "The Good-Natured Man," and attached to a series of verses appearing from time to time in the New York *Evening Post*. The first four of the Croaker pieces were written by Drake upon his return from Europe, under the signature of "Croaker," and were published in the New York *Evening Post*, March 10-20, 1819. The authorship was for a while kept secret. Drake communicated it to his friend Halleck, who, after the fourth number, joined him in the series as "Croaker Junior." Their joint contributions were signed "Croaker & Co."

The Croakers appeared in rapid succession in one season, beginning with the lines by Drake, "To Ennui," March 10, 1819, and ending July 24, with "The Curtain Conversation," by Halleck, since included among his poems under the title "Domestic Happiness." When William Coleman, editor of the *Evening Post*, received the first of the famous Croakers—Drake's verses, "To Ennui"—he announced them to the public as being "the production of genius and taste."

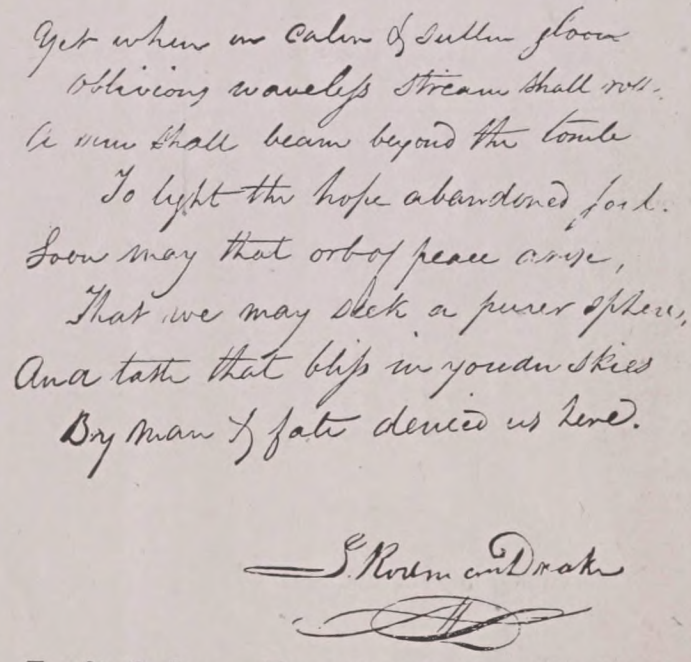
For several months literary New York was mystified as to the authorship of this series of poetical satires on public characters of the period. Politics, music, the drama, and domestic life alike furnished inspiration for the numbers. Halleck, in 1866, said "that they were good-natured verses contributed anonymously to the columns of the New York *Evening Post*, from March to June, 1819, and occasionally afterward."

Of the forty-eight poems of which the whole series was composed, Drake wrote twenty-one, including "The American Flag"; Halleck wrote twenty, while seven were their joint composition. In 1860 the Croaker poems were issued by the Bradford Club of New York, under the sanction of the surviving literary partner, as the production of Drake and Halleck; and in the edition of Halleck's poetical writings in 1869, Mr. Wilson established the authorship of each poem.

Drake's complete poems were not published during his lifetime. A fastidious selection of her father's poems, however, was made in October, 1835, by the poet's only child, his daughter, married to the late Commodore DeKay, famed for his naval engagements in the La Plata while commanding the squadron of Buenos Ayres. This volume, issued in 1836, is fitly dedicated to Halleck, in the following appropriate words:

To
Her Father's Friend,
Fitz-Greene Halleck,
These Poems are
Respectfully Inscribed,
By the Author's Daughter.

Many of the lesser known verses indicate Drake's true place as a poet. In the touching poem "Abelard to Eloise," in the third stanza of "The American Flag," and in innumerable beautiful lines scattered throughout his work, appears a genuine inspiration.



Fac-Simile Stanza From Drake's Poem, "Abelard to Eloise."

Private Life.

Shortly after obtaining his degree, Drake, in October, 1816, married Sarah, the daughter of Henry Eckford of New York, an eminent and opulent shipbuilder of that city. This connection at once placed him in affluent circumstances. Drake had but one child, a daughter, who was lovingly christened, Janet Halleck.

Drake's person was well formed and attractive: a fine head, with a peculiar blue eye, pale and cold in repose, but becoming dark and brilliant under excitement. His voice was full-toned and musical; he was a good reader, and he sang with taste and feeling.

Halleck could not look with any satisfaction upon Drake's marriage. Though he acted as a groomsman at the wedding, he evidently feared the alliance of genius with wealth. Writing to his sister, January 29, 1817, he jestingly describes Drake's marriage as a "sacrifice." He says:

"He was poor, as poets of course always are, and offered himself a sacrifice at the shrine of Hymen, to shun the 'pains and penalties' of poverty. I officiated as groomsman, though much against my will. His wife is good-natured, and loves him to distraction. He is, perhaps, the handsomest man in New York—a face like an angel, a form like an Apollo, and, as I well knew that his person was the true index of his mind, I felt myself during the ceremony as committing a crime in aiding and assisting in such a sacrifice."

Closing Years.

Upon returning from a European tour in 1819, Drake spent one of the happiest and most productive years of his whole life. Such earthly bliss, however, was not long to continue. Already the initial symptoms of his fatal illness had become manifest.

His health failing at this time, he visited New Orleans in the winter of 1819-1820, in the vain hope that change of air and scene would effect its recovery. While in Louisiana he enjoyed the tender and loving attentions of his sister Louisa, then the wife of Judge Nichols. All her efforts, however, were unavailing.

Drake returned to New York in the spring of 1820, fatally smitten with tuberculosis. He lingered during the summer, growing daily weaker and weaker, and constantly administered by DeKay (a relative by marriage), Halleck and Langstaff. He died in the following autumn, on the 21st day of September, 1820, at the age of twenty-five, his frame consumed by his malady, but his mental faculties clear and unimpaired. He was buried in a quiet, rural spot, at Hunt's Point, Westchester County, in the neighborhood of the island of New York. As Halleck returned from the funeral, he said to DeKay: "There will be less sunshine for me hereafter, now that Joe is gone."

A low monument of marble, surmounted by a quadrangular pyramid, rises above the grave where the poet's remains have reposed these one hundred years. The inscription is on one side, and reads thus:

Sacred to the memory of Joseph R. Drake, M. D.,
who died September 21, 1820.
"None knew him but to love him,
None named him but to praise."

Halleck's Loving Tribute.

True to a popular belief that tuberculous persons usually die in the spring of the year, when the leaves come out on the trees, or in autumn, when the leaves wither and fall, Drake died early in the morning of the very day on which autumn begins. Indeed, in Drake's death we have a verification of the beautiful words of another poet:

"When autumn leaves were falling, he fell like a faded leaf;
And the reaper, with the flowers, hath bound him in his sheaf."

Drake's untimely demise was universally regretted. It caused widespread sorrow wherever his great talents were known and appreciated. A deep gloom pervaded the entire metropolis. That one so young, so highly gifted, and possessing such amiable qualities of head and heart, should be taken, was beyond human comprehension.

Halleck was Drake's senior by five years. To him, the early death of his chosen companion and literary partner was an irreparable loss. It was his faithful friend "Fitz" who, with more than a brother's love, soothed his dying pillow; and when the grave had forever closed over Drake, it was the same sorrow-stricken friend who wrote those exquisitely touching lines so familiar to the English speaking world, and which will ever continue to be among Halleck's and Drake's most enduring monuments. This inimitable monody on Drake by his literary partner has perhaps never been equalled for beauty and tenderness, as it has been surpassed in popularity by but few, if any, American poems. The entire poem consists of six four-line stanzas. It is as follows:

On the death of

Joseph Rodman Drake,

of New York, September, 1820.

"Green be the turf above thee,
Friend of my better days!
None knew thee but to love thee,
Nor named thee but to praise.

Tears fell when thou wert dying,
From eyes unused to weep;
And long, where thou art lying,
Will tears the cold turf steep.

When hearts whose truth was proven,
Like thine, are laid in earth,
There should a wreath be woven,
To tell the world their worth.

And I, who woke each morrow
To clasp thy hand in mine,
Who shared thy joy and sorrow,
Whose weal and woe were thine;

It should be mine to braid it
  Around thy faded brow;
But I've in vain essayed it,
  And feel I cannot now.

While memory bids me weep thee,
  Nor thoughts nor words are free;
The grief is fixed too deeply
  That mourns a man like thee.

1795----------1820.

IN MEMORIAM,

JOSEPH RODMAN DRAKE, M.D.

Sacred to the memory of DR. JOSEPH RODMAN DRAKE, who bade farewell to earth one hundred years ago today, September 21st, 1820. Medical Science is proud to claim him as one of her votaries, while the spirit of Poesy points with a finger of pride to his achievements. He made numerous contributions of permanent worth to literature, including the famous patriotic poem entitled, "The American Flag," well known and dearly beloved by every schoolgirl and schoolboy throughout the length and breadth of our land. He fell a victim to tuberculosis, the Great White Death, at the early age of twenty-five years. His influence and his example still abide.

By one of those who come after him.

C.W.G. Rohrer.

Baltimore, Maryland.
September 21st, 1920.

An "In Memoriam" Commemorating the Centenary of Drake's Death.

Summary of Life-Work.

"Drake died in his twenty-sixth year, leaving a daughter, through whom his poetic gift has been transmitted to our day. He had a quick, genuine faculty, and could be frolicsome or earnest at will. As an exercise of that delicate imagination which we term fancy, *The Culprit Fay*, although the work of a youth schooled in fairy-lore and the metres of Coleridge, Scott and Moore, boded well for his future. "The American Flag" is a stirring bit of eloquence in rhyme. The death of this spirited and promising writer was justly deplored. His talent was healthy; had he lived, American authorship might not so readily have become, in Griswold's time, a vent for every kind of romantic and sentimental absurdity.—*Edmund Clarence Stedman.*

Owing to the early impairment of Drake's health, a summing up of his life-work must necessarily be brief. After his graduation in medicine, he survived but a little over four years. Even had he devoted himself exclusively, during this time, to the practice of his chosen profession. he could not have gotten beyond the "dry-bread stage."

As an author, Drake was perhaps the best beloved of all that brilliant group of young poets, essayists and journalists who made up literary New York in the early part of the nineteenth century. He was essentially a true poet and a man of letters. His work was characteristic of his day. He had a certain amount of classical knowledge, a certain eighteenth-century grace and style, yet withal, an instinctive Americanism which flowered out into our first true national literature.

Free from vanity and affectation, Drake did not seek popular applause. When he was on his death-bed, at his wife's request, Dr. DeKay collected and copied all his poems which could be found, and took them to him. "See, Joe," said DeKay, "what I have done." "Burn them," Drake replied, "they are valueless."

C. W. G. ROHRER, PH.D., M. D.

Baltimore, Md.

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